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ABSTRACT

This teachers' guide investigates three National Gallery of Art paintings included in the exhibition "Picasso: The Early Years, 1892-1906." The guide is intended for teachers of middle school and high school students. It includes background information on Pablo Picasso's life and early career, discussion questions, and suggested activities. The Picasso paintings discussed in the guide are: "Le Gourmet" (1901), "Tragedy" (1903), and "Family of Saltimbanques" (1905). (BT)

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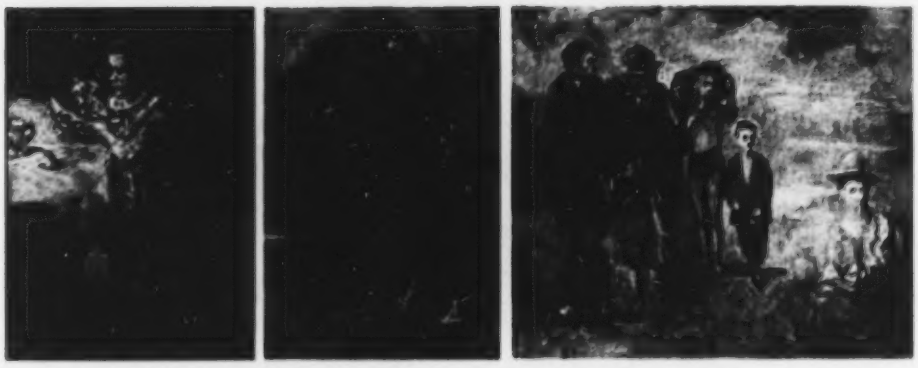
Picasso

A Guide for Teachers



National Gallery of Art, Washington

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PICASSO
The Early Years
1892–1906

Teachers' Guide

This teachers' guide investigates three National Gallery of Art paintings included in the exhibition ***Picasso: The Early Years, 1892–1906***. This guide is written for teachers of middle and high school students. It includes background information, discussion questions and suggested activities. Additional information is available on the National Gallery's web site at **http://www.nga.gov**.

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PICASSO: The Early Years, 1892–1906

Pablo Picasso, one of the most dynamic and influential artists of our century, achieved success in drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and ceramics as well as in painting. He experimented with a number of different artistic styles during his long career. The exhibition *The Early Years* traces his development from 1892-1906, just prior to the advent of cubism.

Background on the Artist

Picasso was born in Málaga on the southern coast of Spain in 1881. He was exposed to art from a very young age by his father, who was a painter and art instructor. After studying at various art schools between 1892 and 1896, including academies in Barcelona and Madrid, he went on to the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid during the winter of 1896-1897. Picasso soon became bored with academics and set himself up as an independent artist.

In Barcelona in 1899 Picasso's circle of friends included young avant-garde artists and writers who traveled between Madrid, Barcelona, and Paris. Picasso also visited these cities and absorbed the local culture. His early works were influenced by old masters such as El Greco and Velázquez and by modern artists including Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Picasso moved to Paris in 1904 and settled in a dilapidated section of Montmartre, a working-class quarter. This area was home to many young artists and writers, and he was gradually assimilated into their stimulating intellectual community. Although Picasso benefited greatly from the artistic atmosphere in Paris and his circle of friends, he was often lonely, unhappy, and terribly poor. During this period his sympathy for social outcasts was reflected in his art, both in his subject matter — including blind beggars and destitute families — and in his melancholy blue color schemes. Picasso's "Blue period," from 1901 to 1904, is represented in the exhibition by *Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child)* (1901) and *Tragedy* (1903).

In 1905 Picasso's works are characterized by a new palette of roses or russets, as well as a shift in subject matter and form. Paintings from this "Rose period" often show transient fairground performers in contemplative moods. The focus is frequently on a group of figures who seem to function as a family or a band of vagabonds, as seen in the paramount work in this series, the large *Family of Saltimbanques*.

Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child)
Paris, summer/autumn 1901
oil on canvas
92.8 x 68.3 (36 1/2 x 26 7/8)
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Chester Dale Collection

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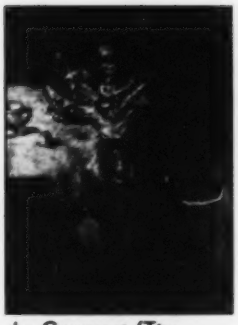

Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child)
Paris, summer/autumn 1901
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National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child) suggests the direction Picasso's art was to take between late 1901 and 1904. It anticipates the Blue period, when his palette became almost exclusively blue, his figures tragic, his mood melancholy, and his style more expressive.

The young girl in this work is tipping her bowl to scrape out a last morsel of food. She is shown with just the barest necessities — a nearly empty bowl, a mug, and a scrap of bread on the table. The titles given this painting seem to be ironic comments on the child's humble condition.

Picasso emphasized curving outlines in the painting by reinforcing them with thick brush strokes. The simplified shapes, flattened background, and skewed perspective create a patterned effect that suggests this scene is removed from the everyday world. The sense of unreality is greatly heightened by the pervasive blue tonality, which nearly overpowers every other color.

Discussion Questions

1. Dark lines in *Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child)* outline different shapes. Discuss how these lines unify the painting.

2. This painting has various titles, *Le Gourmand, Le Gourmet,* and *The Greedy Child.* Discuss why the child might be considered greedy. How might these titles be ironic?

3. Discuss with students how color can be descriptive, symbolic, and suggestive of a mood or emotion.

4. Describe all the various shades of blue in the painting using different adjectives.

Tragedy
Barcelona, 1903
oil on panel
105.4 x 69 (41 1/2 x 27 1/8)
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Chester Dale Collection

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Tragedy
Barcelona, 1903
oil on panel
105.4 x 69 (41 1/2 x 27 1/8)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

The thin, barefoot, shabbily clothed figures in this Blue period composition refer to physical deprivations, which Picasso himself experienced as he struggled to establish himself as an artist. In addition to the cold and hunger of poverty, the work expresses psychological suffering, which may reflect the dislocation that Picasso experienced as a young and destitute foreigner in Paris. This powerful image conveys a sense of spiritual alienation in keeping with the intellectual discontent of his bohemian milieu.

Tragedy is one of a number of Blue period paintings that capture the mood of melancholy and isolation. There is no specific narrative associated with the painting. The man, the woman, and the child exemplify the depths of the human condition. In fact, the ambiguous quality of the work — so laden with meaning, yet beyond literal interpretation — is another of its modern aspects. In an era of few certainties, traditional storytelling may have no longer been seen to serve a meaningful artistic function.

The figures are carefully drawn, and the contours of their bodies reveal much about their states of mind. The faces, especially of the males, are rendered in a way that suggests Picasso's academic training. His Spanish roots are also evident: the elongated proportions that emphasize the sadness of these figures are reminiscent of the work of El Greco, the most important painter of the sixteenth century to work in Spain; and the innate human dignity that these figures maintain in the face of tragedy is characteristic of the paintings of the great Spanish baroque artist Diego Velázquez.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the colors in nature for beaches? sand? sky? When is the sky not blue? Does everyone agree on the choices, or is color symbolism subjective? Ask students to identify personal color symbols.

2. Ask students for their ideas on how to convey the theme of despair. Consider facial expressions, body language, colors, shapes, and the artistic media used.

3. Compare *Tragedy* and *Le Gourmet (The Greedy Child)*. Which work conveys a greater sense of despair? Why?

4. How does *Tragedy* relate to other works of art by Picasso in this time period? How does his art reflect who Picasso was as a person, where he came from, and what he encountered in his world politically, socially, and culturally?

Family of Saltimbanques
Paris, 1905
oil on canvas
212.8 x 229.6 (83 3/4 x 90 3/8)
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection

Family of
Saltimbanques
Paris,1905
oil on canvas
212.8 x 229.6 (83 3/4 x 90 3/8)
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Chester Dale Collection

This scene of fairground performers was Picasso's most significant work to date. The name of the painting comes from the Italian words *saltare* (meaning "to leap") and *banco* (the word for "bench"– which refers to the stage on which the acrobats usually performed). Saltimbanques were the lowest order of acrobats; Picasso pictured them as vagabonds with simple props in an empty, desertlike landscape. He was familiar with earlier representations of clowns and harlequins from eighteenth-century art, which frequently included figures from the commedia dell'arte, a popular theatrical form featuring stock characters and their antics. These characters played significant roles in the paintings of such artists as Tiepolo, the Le Nain, and Watteau.

Picasso's painting was inspired by a group of performers he and his colleagues befriended at the Cirque Medrano, which had quarters near the artist's Paris studio in Montmartre. Picasso was particularly drawn to the circus people, many of whom were his Spanish countrymen. Their agility and pursuit of the art of illusion delighted him, and their gypsylike lives touched the artist, who himself searched for new horizons.

Picasso identified most closely with the clowns, those performers who masked their true selves with costumes and makeup. In fact, Picasso portrayed himself as the harlequin in a diamond-patterned costume in *Family of Saltimbanques*. The jester and the acrobats are lost in their own thoughts and glance toward the woman, who sits alone, while the harlequin reaches out to the child behind his back. In his deft representations of the various figures, Picasso manages to portray not only the lifestyle of the real saltimbanques but also the apparent melancholy mood of his friends and the collective alienation of this group.

Picasso's huge canvas was a considerable investment for the struggling artist and may explain why he repainted the subject at least four times, one on top of the other. X-radiography reveals the figures positioned differently in earlier versions. Some of Picasso's changes, including the woman's shoulders and hat, the color of the child's ballet slippers, the red jester's missing leg, and the harlequin's top hat, emerge as ghostlike outlines (*pentimenti*) in the final painting.

Discussion Questions

1. Study the composition of the painting. What kind of a geometric shape do the figures form? What makes your eye move from one part of the canvas to the other? Choose a color with many variations, such as red, and explain how pigments are mixed to make different hues and many pale tints and dark shades.

2.What do peoples' glances in the painting tell you about their relationships? How does body language play a role? Is the grouping of figures significant?

3. Do you think Picasso had more than one set of meanings for the image of circus performers? Why? Why not?

Activities

•Create a line of dialogue for each of the characters in the painting that will reveal their feelings.

•Pose class members in the exact positions of the saltimbanques. Discover which positions are natural and comfortable and which have been altered to help the artist's composition.

•Ask students to make a painting using different shades of one color or analogous colors (colors that are next to each other on the color wheel). Have them select a subject that is appropriate for the colors they choose.

•Have students do a series of drawings of their bedroom in colored pencils or markers. The first drawing to be done at school, from memory; the second drawn at home, as realistically as possible. For the third, ask students to depict their bedrooms expressively, using line, color, and scale.

•Ask students to write a short poem or essay. Have them consider how they can find verbal equivalents to color and form, e.g., the cold, blue tones and taut, isolated figures of Picasso's *Tragedy*.

•Study the relationship of the figures in *Tragedy* and *Family of Saltimbanques*. What are the kinds of relationships expressed by the figures. How do they interact? Create your own composition communicating ideas of relationships.

•Research and study art critics of Picasso's time. Write your own review of Picasso's works.